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ABSTRACT

The teaching of writing skills is such a complex and timely process that it militates its introduction and reinforcement from the outset of English as a second language instruction. This paper presents and describes writing activities for beginning, intermediate, advanced, and transitional levels. Among the beginning level activities suggested are copying with understanding, sentence completions, dictations, experience charts, everyday communications, situation dialogues (rejoinders), development of original sentences, sentence combinations, sentence expansion, summaries, controlled compositions, and guided compositions. Among the intermediate level activities suggested are summaries, ordering of statements, completion of forms, friendly letters, outlining, creative or recreational writing, and reactions. Suggested advanced level activities include expansion of previous writing assignments, book reports, business letters, letters of complaint, reporting, and thematic compositions. Transitional level activities include continuation of letter writing, persuasive composition, expository compositions, and cloze practice. (JK)

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TEACHING WRITING TO ESL STUDENTS

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One of the most serious misconceptions held by numerous teachers of beginning level ESL [redacted] is that the introduction of meaningful writing tasks can be deferred to some "other time". Because the teaching of writing skills is considered to be the most difficult and time-consuming of all language skills, it is felt that introducing and refining writing skills at the beginning level will interfere with the other linguistic priorities of that level: vocabulary, pronunciation, auditory and oral skills development and basic syntax. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The very fact that the teaching of writing skills is such a complex and timely process militates its introduction and reinforcement from the very outset of ESL instruction. And just as we do not teach other linguistic skills in a vacuum, neither should writing find itself left alone somewhere looking for company. It is a universally accepted principle in the field of language teaching that all linguistic skills are interrelated and must be taught and reinforced within a coherent, sequential and integrated curriculum.

How do students learn to write? How do they know what to write? Well, think back to your college days when you had to write those lengthy term papers on every conceivable topic from "Macroeconomic Factors in a Capitalist Society" to "The Demographical Patterns of Nomadic Tribes". Do you remember those days? Well, while you were preparing the first draft, you most likely thought about what you were going to put down on paper and then recorded it as fast as humanly possible in order not to forget it. Each sentence that you recorded was a direct reflection of your thinking. And each thought was the culmination of a mental process whereby you grouped x number of words which, when placed in a grammatically acceptable order, expressed a complete and comprehensible idea. How did this complete and comprehensible idea evolve? The answer is simple enough: the thinker, YOU, applying your knowledge of syntax and command of vocabulary, placed all of these components into a specific word order, resulting in a complete, logical and comprehensible idea. Can this be done via intuition? Can this ability be taught incidentally? The answer to these questions is a categorical NO.

To state the facts even more simply, you must have mastery of basic vocabulary and syntax in order to write well. And, to write well, the student must begin to write at the very beginning of his ESL experience. He must write while he is also learning about verbs, nouns, tenses, modals, modifiers; while he is also learning the vocabulary of the home, school, neighborhood, etc. To fail to initiate writing tasks concurrently with these other crucial skills will seriously retard the development of competent writing later on.

Another very practical reason for incorporating writing skills development into the beginning level curriculum is that the New York State Competency Test in Writing includes three kinds of writing tasks which are well within the ability of foreign-born students given the proper preparation. If we hold to our goals of developing English-proficient students and mainstreaming them prior to graduation, then we must assume the responsibility of adequately preparing them to compete with native speakers of English of the same age and grade. To accomplish this is a difficult and arduous process. But, to have any hope to success, we must enable students to write well enough to do 11th and 12th grade writing assignments: business letters, book reports, summaries, essays, thematic and persuasive compositions, et al.

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To offer an idea of the kinds of writing activities that can be planned and easily implemented at the beginning and subsequent levels of ESL instruction, a list of suggested writing activities follows for your consideration. These, along with other writing tasks created by the teacher, will provide a sound basis for the development of writing proficiency by the ESL student.

BEGINNING LEVEL

1. Copying with Understanding - This is the most basic yet meaningful writing activity for a beginner. The student learns to copy what he has heard and said. Written references immediately following oral/aural drills are essential for good writing. The student learns to copy items that have functional uses: names, addresses, phone numbers, dates, room numbers, program cards, school and class rules, etc.

2. Sentence Completions - The student demonstrates comprehension of either oral or written work by completing sentences. This is basic to learning logical word order.

3. Dictations - Auditory skills and correct spelling are reinforced as the student writes what he hears.

4. Experience Charts - This is a popular device in elementary grades and one which can be easily adapted to the secondary level. Activities, achievements and other important events are recorded by the students.

5. Everyday Communications - The student learns to write simple notes, memoranda, instructions, invitations, et al.

6. Situation Dialogues (Rejoinders) - The student assumes the role of a person engaged in a conversation and must prepare logical statements which result in a comprehensible conversation. Dialogues found in many beginning level texts may be used as a basis for this activity.

7. Development of Original Sentences - The teacher may reinforce vocabulary items by having students use each word or expression in an original statement. The best sentences collected from the entire class may be used as review material for sentence structure, word order, etc. Sentence transformations (positive - negative, declarative - interrogative, et al.) may then be practiced as well.

8. Sentence Combinations - Two separate sentences are combined to form one grammatically correct statement. This activity also serves as a valuable review of vocabulary and syntactical structures.

9. Sentence Expansion - The student learns to expand and enlarge sentences by adding a new element.

10. Summaries - A beginning level ESL student should be asked to prepare brief (a few lines) summaries of reading material covered in class. A summary at this level of ESL training will set the tone for more challenging writing assignments at subsequent levels. In addition, learning to prepare summaries at this level will help develop the critical skill of expressing the 'main ideas(s)'.

11. Controlled Compositions - The student rewrites an already prepared composition but changes one or more elements (verb tense, noun to pronoun, positive to negative, etc.). This activity may be introduced at this level and expanded to all future levels of ESL instruction.

12. Guided Compositions - The student prepares a composition based on cues or guidelines prepared by the teacher. This is similar to the writing assignment found on the Two-Year City-Wide Foreign Language Exam. This activity should also be continued at the intermediate and advanced levels of ESL.

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

1. Summaries - A continuation of summaries should be pursued at this level. They should be increased in length and scope commensurate with the reading material utilized in the ESL class.

2. Ordering of Statements - This activity provides for the ordering of statements in a logical or chronological sequence. This is an essential skill that must be introduced and reinforced early in the student's language development program. Many texts utilize this activity in the testing section since it helps students to learn the important skill of sequencing.

3. Completion of Forms - At this level the ESL student should be taught to prepare everyday forms: bank slips, job applications, school forms, driver's license application, et al.

4. Friendly Letters - The student must begin to freely express his ideas and feelings in simple letters to friends, relatives, classmates, teachers, etc.

5. Outlining - Outlining is an important skill to practice during the second year of ESL instruction as ESL students will be required to do more challenging tasks such as: book reports, compositions, essays, etc. on the advanced level and in mainstream English classes. The mechanics and purpose of this activity should be "outlined" to students at this point. Also, outlining practice will help to develop and strengthen the important writing skill of categorizing.

6. Creative or Recreational Writing - Students should be encouraged to compose words for songs, change words to popular songs, compose simple poetic verses and short stories. *Translations of any written material from the student's native language to English may be attempted BUT special care must be taken not to produce literal translations as no two languages are so parallel.

7. Reactions - Written reactions to various aural, visual or written stimuli will provide excellent practice for students who will very shortly be required to prepare detailed compositions in which they will have to react and express their feelings. A discussion of current and, often, controversial issues serves as a valuable springboard for written reactions by students. Also, pictures from newspapers, magazines, etc. lend themselves quite readily to this kind of activity.

ADVANCED LEVEL

1. Expansion of Previous Writing Assignments - Many of the writing activities listed on the beginning and intermediate levels should be continued and expanded where possible.

2. Book Reports - More detailed reports on literature read in or out of the ESL class should be carried out. Students should be able to describe the plot and main characters, discuss central ideas and express opinions about works that they have read. At least one outside reading assignment should be required of advanced ESL students each term.

3. Business Letters - The standard procedures for the business letter should be introduced at this level. It is one of the three writing tasks found on the Competency Test in Writing.

4. Letters of Complaint - While similar in structure to the standard business letter, a letter of complaint may focus in on the critical writing skill of 'cause and effect'.

5. Reporting - The student must begin to practice the reporting of events as required on the Competency Test in Writing. Events may include field trips, school events, sporting events, news features, television programs, etc.

6. Thematic Compositions - Students must begin to build compositions around basic themes: biography, autobiography, my city or country, my family life, my school: the positive and negative, an important person in my life, an important event in my life, and any one of a thousand other possibilities.

TRANSITIONAL LEVEL - If your ESL program is fortunate enough to offer a fourth level of instruction, then you must take advantage of that fact and prepare the students for the mainstream.

1. Continuation of Letter Writing - All forms of letter writing previously introduced should be continued and intensified at this level.

2. Persuasive Compositions - This is the third kind of writing activity found on the Competency Test in Writing. It should be practiced extensively at this level.

3. Expository Compositions - Along the lines of an essay, writing expository compositions affords the ESL student an opportunity to write freely about a topic of importance to himself.

4. Cloze Practice - While this exercise is designed to improve reading skills, it may also serve as an excellent means of strengthening writing skills. *Note that the Competency Test in Reading follows this format.